

For The Aged And The Sick

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Today, my talk is especially addressed to the sick and old persons. The reason for this talk is that there was a Buddhist layperson who came and asked if I could give a small Dharma talk to his parents who were old and dying - and because he wanted his parents to be alert, clear-minded when the time came. I sympathized with him and also in order to help the sick, old persons during this critical time, we are giving you today's talk.

First of all, death is not frightening. Everybody thinks that birth is happiness, death is suffering; birth is happy and death is scary. As for all of you here - Are you afraid of dying? Actually, dying is not frightening at all. Old age and sickness are two out of four kinds of suffering which the Buddha had mentioned, namely: "Birth, Old age, Sickness, and Death". Old age and illness are suffering. If one is no longer concerned with old age and illness, then one is free. In brief, if one dies, one leaves old age and sickness behind - that means one should be happy for one is finally free from them. Therefore, we say death is not frightening at all.

Secondly, as Buddha always says "where there is life, there is death". Life and Death are natural phenomena, no one can escape them. Like the Buddha, He lived and died when He was eighty years old. Some called themselves "immortals", like the "Eight Fairies" in Chinese legend, but the truth is that they did actually live longer than so-called mortals.

Nevertheless, there were "Eight Fairies" but now you cannot even find one who still survives. As we see, the Buddha who attained enlightenment; however, when his body deteriorated, he had to let it go. Therefore, death is natural and it happens to us all, with no exception. To be frightened of the inevitable is not wise. To be worried of the unavoidable is useless. Death will come to us all, and we all have to accept it matter-of-factly. It is a natural process, there is no need to be scared.

Thirdly, as Buddhist laypersons practising the five precepts or even the ten precepts diligently, they know for sure that they will come back as human beings with all good opportunities. As one practices the five precepts which are:

1. Abstaining from killing, one can enjoy longevity.
2. Abstaining from stealing, one can enjoy prosperity.
3. Abstaining from adultery, one can be beautiful and respectful.
4. Abstaining from falsehood, one obtains melodious voice, is trusted by people.
5. Abstaining from alcoholic drinks and drugs, one can be intelligent and wise.

Being reborn as a human being with all these good qualities, suitable conditions and lacks nothing is the result of practicing the five precepts.

As one leaves one's "rotten" body, one obtains a "better" body in one's next life, so there is no need to worry. If one practices the ten precepts diligently and correctly, one will be reborn in heaven with better conditions than in human realm.

We always say that dying is like exchanging an old car for a new one. If we know that once we leave this body, we will have a new better one, then we do not need to be sad or worried. Death is not frightening, the frightening fact is that we did not practice the precepts properly.

Hereby, I want to remind all of you who are presently sick/dying, think about what I have to say and try to change or go on diligently with your practice. The Buddha had spoken of "Death-Proximate Karma". This kind of karma is really powerful. It could lead us to a better or worse realm after we die. If the Death-Proximate Karma is good it will lead a dying person to a good realm and vice versa.

For we see that in a human or animal realm, there are some people or animals who live and die in a short period of

time, and the reason for which they came and stayed shortly was conditioned by the Death-Proximate Karma. After this lifetime, they were led to other realms according to their Habitual Karma (Accina). To remind all of you even when you have good Habitual Karma, you had better keep your mind calm and alert, think of only good deeds during dying moment; so that you can go on with a better life. If at the moment of dying, you get angry or become attached to people or things, these reactions will have a negative effect on your next rebirth despite your good Habitual Karma. On the contrary, if you think of wholesome or good things at the moment of dying, you could benefit a good rebirth in spite of your bad Habitual Karma. Nevertheless, the Death-Proximate Karma only plays an important role for a short time; after that the Habitual Karma is the crucial one which will give you a good rebirth for a long period of time. Therefore, at the dying moment, make sure that we stay alert, calm, clear-minded and especially do not let impure thoughts arise. The sutra tells us the story of Devadatta, who committed all possible cruelties should be condemned to hell. However, at the moment of dying, Devadatta repented and asked the Buddha for forgiveness. Later, Buddha told Ananda that even Devadatta was condemned to hell for his bad deeds; but because of his repentance before dying, he will then come back as a human being and work out his bad deeds and finally will become a Buddha in the future. Devadatta committed lots of cruelties during his lifetime, but before his death, he had repented. Thus, after having paid all his debts, he would come back as a human being and work his way through Buddhahood. The Death-Proximate Karma can help to shorten our bad rebirth. Another story told us about a Deity who foresaw his next rebirths. This Deity saw that when he died, he would reincarnate as a son of a rich Brahmin in the human realm, and after this rebirth, he would go straight to hell. Stricken by this knowledge, he cried out for help. A Deva then came and told him the only one who could help him is the Buddha who now stayed at the Bamboo's Grove. The Deity then knelt down and headed his prayer to Buddha. He stated thrice his name and vowed to take refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and the Sangha, then he died. He did reincarnate as a son of the Brahmin. One day, he saw the Buddha taking his alms, as soon as he saw the Buddha, he decided to become a monk.

Later, in accordance with the Buddha's teaching, he worked diligently and became an Arhat, free from birth and death. Thus, his condemnation to hell was annihilated. Throughout this story, we understand that the Death-Proximate Karma is quite important, it could lead us to a better rebirth and could give us a second chance to walk on the right path.

Thereupon, we, as Buddhists, should remember and comprehend well the working of the Death-Proximate Karma, without forgetting that the Habitual Karma is also important because it is the lifetime Karma that we depend on for our next rebirth which is created by accumulating our good/bad deeds. Here are some instructions for the dying:

1. Do not get angry - pay attention to the dying moment, take care of your death. Do not get angry - at this critical moment, if you are angry, mad, you will be reborn in a lower realm.
2. Forgive and forget - do not think of your enemies or vengeance, because you will reincarnate and take vengeance at each other endlessly. When this occurs, you accumulate more negative deeds and cannot go on with the right practice.
3. Do not become attached to loved ones or wealth, etc. This attachment will lead you to lower realm (e.g. animal realm's).

In the history book of the thirty-three Zen masters, there is a story about one of the Zen master who went out for alms, passing by a rich man's house. The rich man was out, but inside came running out a dog that barked at him loudly. The Zen master looked at it and reproved:

"How dare you barking at me, because of the attachment of wealth that you came back as a dog, shame on you!" After having heard the master's reprimand, the dog became sad and refused to eat. Lately, the rich man came back and realized that his beloved dog refused to eat, he asked his servants the reason. The servants told him that in the morning, there was a Zen master who passed by and said something to the dog and afterwards it refused to eat. The rich man was so upset that he went out to look for the Zen master. He queried:

- What did you say to my dog this morning that has made him sad and refused to eat?

The master replied:

- Please do not get angry at me. The dog is your father.

The rich man got even angrier and asked:

- Why is that dog my father?

The master said:

- If you do not believe me, go home and see if the dog is lying under your father's bed. Right where the dog is lying, you dig up and will find a bowl of gold. When your father passed away, he did not get a chance to tell you the secret; so he came back as your dog to guard it. Just go home and dig up then you will understand.

The rich man immediately went back home, dug up under his father's bed and found the bowl of gold. Afterwards, he ran back to the master and asked the master to help his father. The master convinced the rich man to use that gold for charity work. The rich man obeyed the master and few days later the dog died.

Likewise, because of wealth attachment that the man came back as a dog to guard his property. This is apprehensive. Here I have mentioned the three don'ts at the dying moment, as a Buddhist, please remember and do not let them happen. I repeat:

happen. I repeat.

- firstly, do not get angry;
- secondly, do not think of vengeance;
- thirdly, do not become attached.

Remember, do not have these three thoughts, otherwise, they will take you to lower realms.

On the contrary, at the dying moment, think of good deeds.

- Firstly, think of helping poor people the best you can.
- Secondly, as a Buddhist, think of offering to the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha); or as non-Buddhist, think of taking refuge to the Three Jewels in order to cultivate a true spiritual path.
- Thirdly, think of freeing all captured animals, and saved them from being killed.

Giving alms, helping the sangha, and freeing all captured animals are good deeds. By practicing good deeds, we gradually walk on the right path, and these are good thoughts that we should have at dying moment. The Buddhist who practices correctly, should know how to apply the Dharma at this crucial moment.

- Firstly, for Buddhist who recites Amitabha Buddha's name, when confined in bed because of illness, please remember to recite Buddha's name continually, neither thinking of beloved ones nor property. Following this practice properly, one will surely go to the Buddha's realm.

- Secondly, for people who do not recite Buddha's name, but are used to reading sutras, should at least remember a stanza.

- Thirdly, for people who meditate, remember to stay with "your awareness", do not run after your thoughts. Remember that in the deterioration of the body, there is something else which is never deteriorated. Thinking like that, you will not be frightened, but stay with your "Buddha's nature, your pure awareness". The body is not real, you have it and then you lose it. The "Buddha's nature" is the only thing which is timeless and deathless, and that is the good thought you should keep in mind at the dying moment.

For the three different situations mentioned above, people who recite Buddha's name should only think of Buddha's name, forget everything else. People who are used to reading sutras, should remember a stanza. People who meditate, stay with your "pure awareness", do not be afraid, do not be worried; just letting go.

These are some of the reminders for that crucial moment.

Now, I am talking about the funeral. Lots of people tell their families to do this, to do that. It is not important. Why? Because the body is composed of the four elements (earth, fire, water, wind); when we are alive, we drink water to maintain the water element, we eat to maintain the earth element, we breath to maintain the wind element, etc... Thus, in order to keep the four elements together and have them work properly, we must borrow similar elements from the outside.

When we die, we stop borrowing, then the four existing elements will automatically dissolve by themselves. In foreign countries as well as in our motherland, the four elements are alike. The body is dust so let it return to dust. Do not think that leaving your body in a foreign country is a loss. Dying without being alert, calm and clear-minded is the real loss.

Let family members decide among themselves to perform the funeral properly according to their means. That is if there is a crematory nearby, then cremation will be performed. If there is a patch of land, then let them perform the inhumation. The important role is our pure thoughts and good deeds which will lead us to happiness. The funeral ceremony plays second role, so do not overestimate it.

These are my reminders to you all, and hope that when we get old and pass away, we will not be a problem for family members. I only mentioned some of the most important things to do at dying moment. You have the free will to choose your own direction, just do not let bad, uncontrolled thoughts overcome your pure mind. This is important.

I wish that after having listened to this Dharma talk, all of you will go home and practice diligently and correctly. The practice will help you to save yourself and this is also the Buddha's teaching which will help us walk on the right path and eventually Buddha's teaching will get us out of this suffering world.

